



Kaidara

Embodiment of the Ultimate Possibilities of Human Knowledge

in

Fulani Cosmology

Imaginative Templates of Philosophy and Mysticism



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[Compcros](#)

Comparative Cognitive Processes and Systems
"Exploring Every Corner of the Cosmos in Search of Knowledge"

Summary

In this essay, I discuss my fascination with the figure of Kaidara, god of gold and of knowledge in classical Fulani cosmology, highlighting the epistemological and metaphysical implications of this figure and the relationship of his image with artistic, historical and existential expressions of human embodiment and outline my verbal and visual contributions to developing the Kaidara mythos and its associated cognitive world. This essay itself constitutes part of this contribution, adapting Etienne Souppart's illustrations from the children's version of the Kaidara story, [*The Secret of Kaidara : An Animist Tale from Africa \(Tales of Heaven and Earth\)*](#), by Hyacinthe Vulliez and Gwen Marsh, narrating and commenting on the account of the search for Kaidara within the context of expounding the symbolic scope of this enigmatic and yet compelling figure.

Cover image by Etienne Souppart from [*The Secrets of Kaidara : An Animist Tale from Africa*](#) by Hyacinthe Vulliez and Gwen Marsh.

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The Paradox of Kaidara

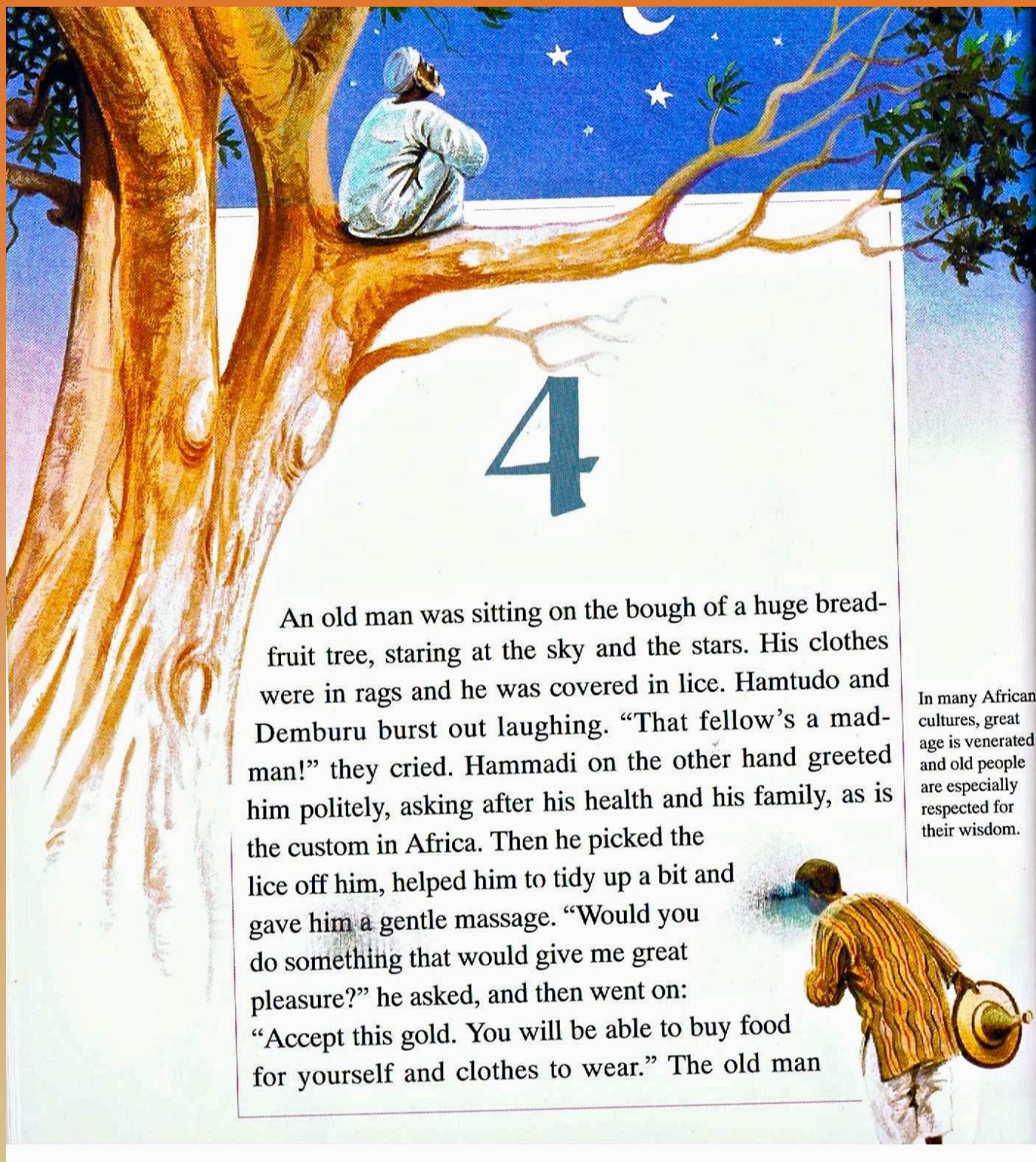
One of my favorite symbolic figures is Kaidara, an embodiment of the ultimate possibilities of human knowledge in classical Fulani cosmology. Ahmadou Hampate Ba, from whose writings I learnt about this figure, describes Kaidara's name as indicating "limit", "finality", which may be taken as symbolizing the conclusion of human knowledge, the point at which human understanding terminates.

I find that conception more inspiring when presented, not in terms of the zone in which knowing reaches an end, but of the expanse demonstrated by the possibilities of this cognitive range, a breadth conceived in terms of a scope unknown, its borders constantly extending as insight grows. I emphasize an interpretation of this idea that focuses on the recognition of the configuration of human comprehension at any point in time in order to restructure this formation by broadening its borders, a constantly unfolding pattern of possibility in terms of a movement from the present to the future. Kaidara represents for me, therefore, the farthest vistas to which human interpretation of existence can travel, a horizon that constantly uncoils in response to human effort.

A similar tantalizing paradox of immediacy and remoteness is sketched by Ba in his summation of the image of Kaidara in "[Out of the Land of Shadows: A West African People Learns to Respect the Cosmic Order](#)" in the *UNESCO Courier*, May 1990, 22-25: "He is 'the far and the very near', 'remote yet very close', both at once, for one feels one can understand him easily while in fact he is boundless, inexhaustible, indicating a distance between knowledge and its imperfect approximations".

Kaidara's Embodiment of the Epistemological, the Metaphysical and the Human

What I find particularly compelling about Kaidara is the delightful paradox he personifies, a paradox demonstrated in the conjunction of something conventionally unappealing, something deeply disturbing, with the awe inspiring. The figure of Kaidara combines the reduction of human capacity enabled by advanced age with the inadequacy demonstrated by poverty and magnifies this potent image through



An old man was sitting on the bough of a huge bread-fruit tree, staring at the sky and the stars. His clothes were in rags and he was covered in lice. Hamtudo and Demburu burst out laughing. "That fellow's a mad-man!" they cried. Hammadi on the other hand greeted him politely, asking after his health and his family, as is the custom in Africa. Then he picked the lice off him, helped him to tidy up a bit and gave him a gentle massage. "Would you do something that would give me great pleasure?" he asked, and then went on: "Accept this gold. You will be able to buy food for yourself and clothes to wear." The old man

In many African cultures, great age is venerated and old people are especially respected for their wisdom.

The seeker encounters the fountain of knowledge in a guise unappealing to most, but demonstrates to the ostensibly repellent figure kindness that gains for the seeker the "unlocking of the lips of wisdom", that proves providential in his quest for the consummating encounter in which the ultimate embodiment of gnosis will eventually reveal himself without concealment, a fortune his companions do not enjoy because they are fixated on superficial discernment.

the convergence of the transcendental and the concrete, the divine and the human, the ultimate and the contingent.

This picture is dazzling in its scope, integrating three major conceptions, epistemological, metaphysical and human. I understand the epistemological as relating to enquiry into the nature of knowledge, and of methods of reaching and assessing it, the metaphysical as centered in explorations of the meaning of existence, in its particulars and in terms of the structure and orientation generated by the totality of being and the existential as encompassing the facts of human experience.

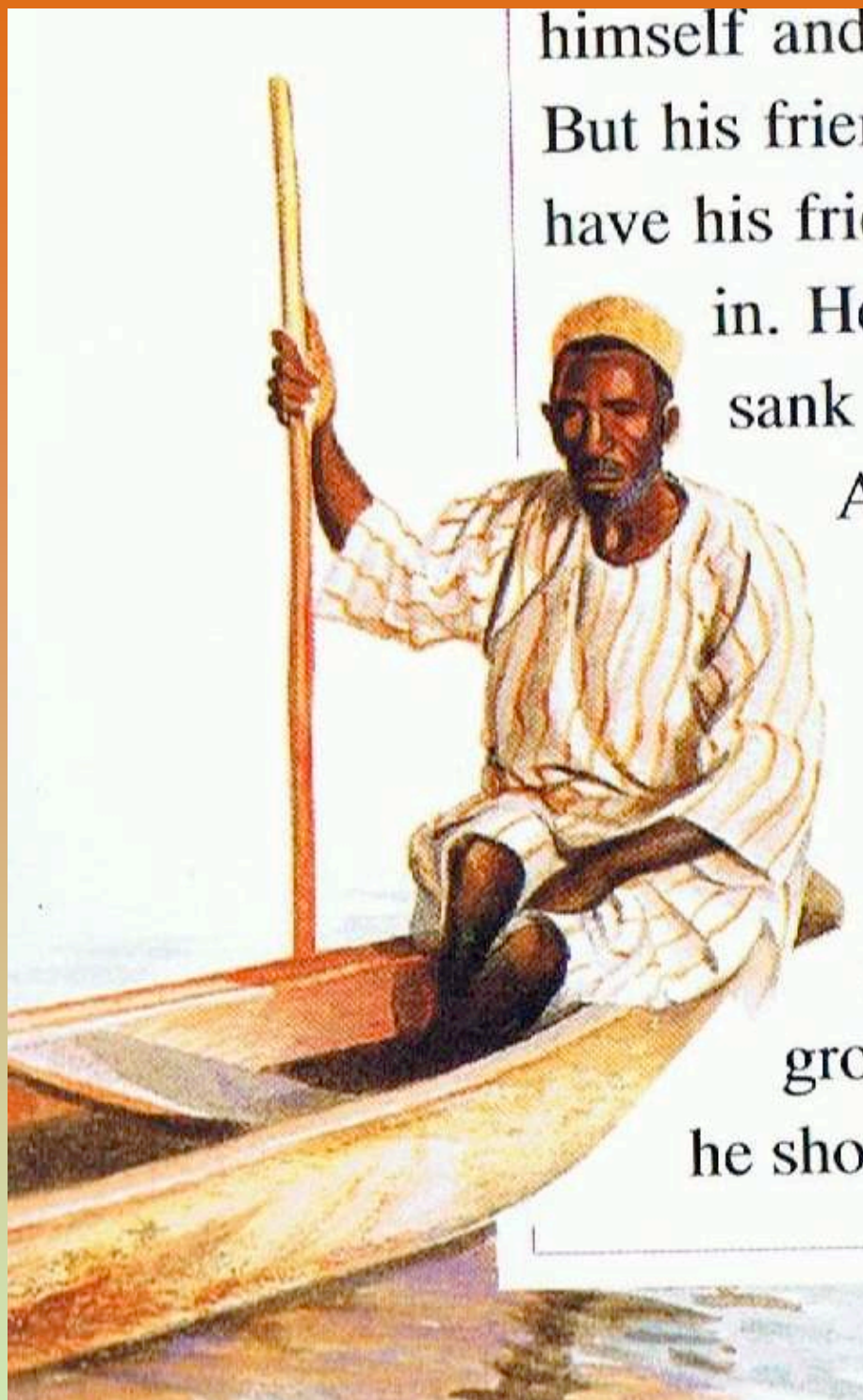
The Epistemological

The epistemological is represented by Kaidara in his being conceived in terms of the ultimate possibilities of knowledge.

The Metaphysical

The metaphysical is demonstrated in his description as an emanation of ultimate reality manifesting the structure and dynamism of the material world, as Ba depicts him in "Out of the Land of Shadows", 24-25:

Kaidara typifies knowledge, which even dictates the form he assumes. An extraordinary being with seven heads, twelve arms and thirty feet, perched on an endlessly rotating four-footed throne; Kaidara represents the structure of the world and time: the seven days of the week, the twelve months and thirty days of the month. He represents the perpetual [rotation] of the earth, the four [primary] elements and the four cataclysms, which, according to the prophecies, will destroy the world of humankind. Kaidara epitomizes knowledge of cosmic order and disorder alike: pervasive dualism and the annihilation of some beings by others. He represents knowledge of the laws of society but also of psychology. Every symbol encountered on the path to Kaidara represents a human type, with its positive and negative aspects.



The last stage of Hammadi's journey in his travels in search of Kaidara involve crossing a river with the aid of the only ferryman in sight, who requests all the gold Hammadi has gained on his journey as payment for helping him cross. Hammadi surrenders this material wealth only to get it back unexpectedly after the crossing is made. Only those fully committed to the ultimate will get there, thereby reaching a position in which is all placed in adequate perspective. His fellow questers refuse to pay the ferryman as he demands, try to cross the river on foot and are drowned in the process.

Kaidara's actualization of the knowledge of the character of the material word as well as of knowledge of human society and human psychology derives from his role as "a beam of light projected from the burning centre that is Gueno", "the Eternal, the Omnipotent, the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer", source of all good and all evil, "who bestows life and takes it away", a transcendence that is not in direct contact with human beings, but interacts with humanity through his emanations, supernatural spirits who act as channels for him.

One of these living doorways is "Kaidara the initiator", operating as an intermediary between human beings and the ultimacy that is Gueno, assuming various forms, human and non-human, animate and inanimate, in pursuit of this goal, employing these diverse appearances in order to test seekers of his knowledge, some of these tests involving the ability to distinguish between the material wealth, the gold, he can readily make available and the treasure represented by the knowledge he personifies.

The Human

The human is expressed in his favourite manifestation as a bent and decrepit old man, his clothes covered in lice, a form he assumes to test people he meets, to see if they can look beyond his exterior and recognize the core of precious value he encapsulates, a priceless interiority symbolized by gold, hence he is known as god of gold and of knowledge. Ba's picture of this appearance of Kaidara is particularly graphic:

Polymorphous when he makes himself visible, he may assume a multitude of visible forms, but he prefers to adopt the features of little, deformed old men or beggars, to help him confuse, lead astray would-be opportunists or superficial, shallow individuals.

Kaidara's Human Expression Emblematic of Creative Contradictions in Human Experience and Myth

I find Kaidara's image as a destitute old man particularly moving because it integrates a motif evident in various imaginative creations and historical forms, of the character who seems deeply inadequate in terms of conventional parameters of social value yet possesses or



On taking Hammadi across the river, the ferryman sinks the canoe and walks away on the surface of the water. On crossing to the other shore represented by enlightenment into ultimate meaning, the Zen Buddhist insight states, of what further use are the instruments, the constructs through which the crossing was made? Beyond all boundaries represented by anything conceivable by the human mind is the meaning of all, that line of thought concludes. "The river is considered the road to Knowledge [the canoe] is considered, by analogy, as the vehicle of the initiate on his spiritual journey"

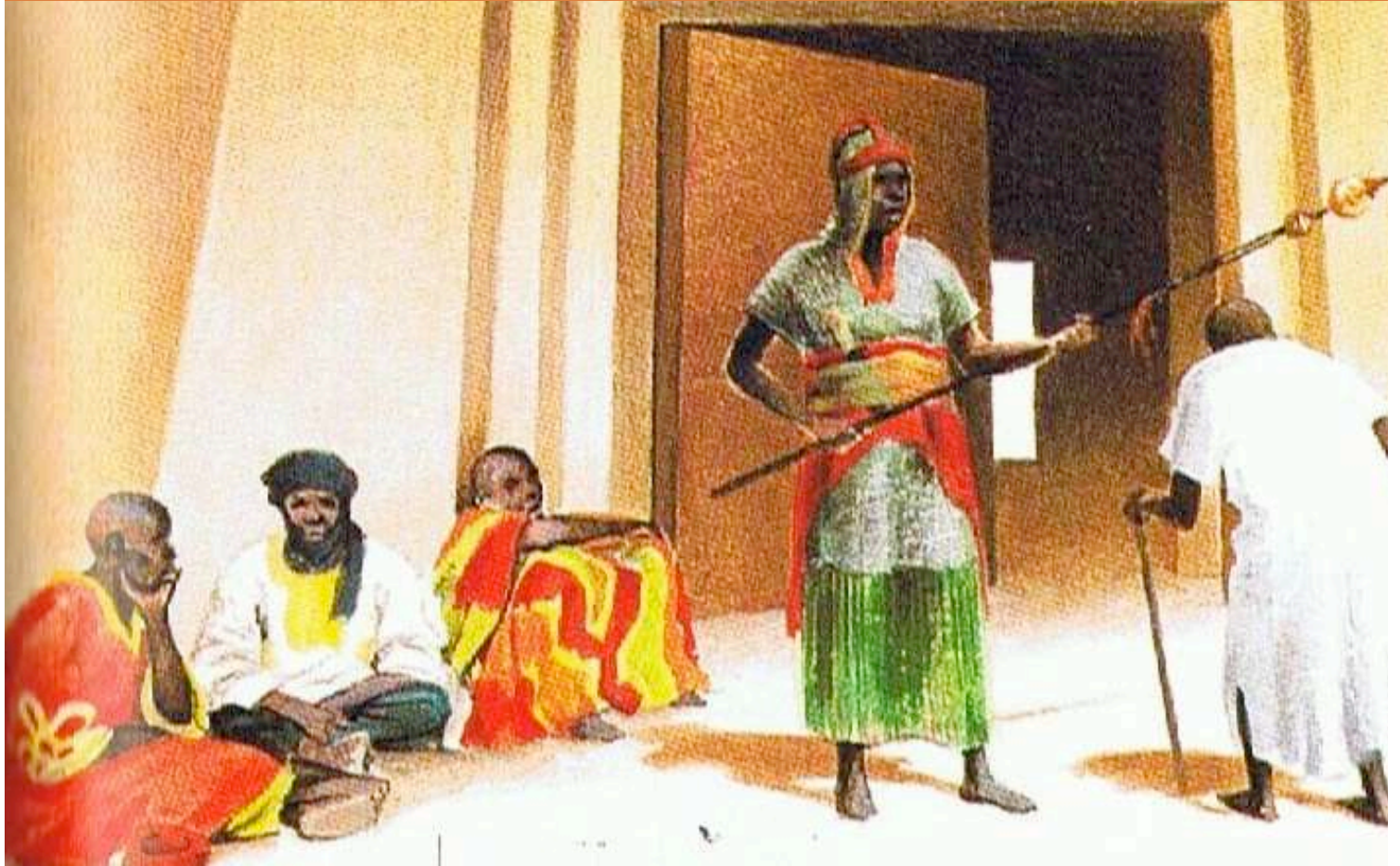
Ahmadou Hampate Ba in note 32 of the last section of *Njedo Dewal : Matrix of Calamity*, a Fulbe initiatory tale complementary to *Kaidara*. "The river the seekers are subsequently to cross is now separating the past from the future. The canoe is the instrument of crossing no doubt, evoking knowledge and values that must be transcended after they have aided the crossing to the other shore, to another state of being. Having enabled the crossing, the boat is outgrown and sunk without hesitation"- Theodore Monod, "In the Land of Kaydara".

represents something priceless which most others do not ordinarily have access to. This inadequacy may include the absence of a particular sensory capacity, such as the lack of the sense of sight in blindness, a state reported by Philip Peek in *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing* as understood as capable of being particularly helpful for divinatory insight in a particular African divination system, or the economic and social limitations of the mendicant and the hermit, as practiced in Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity. The mendicant begs for food yet is seen as personifying the ultimate value demonstrated by dedication of his life to a quest for the supreme meaning of existence, a quest requiring his or her freedom from the constraints of having to earn a living as others do, hence the lay person assists the mendicant and the mendicant shares his or her knowledge and blessings with the lay person.

The hermit is withdrawn from the social contexts vital for sustaining human existence as ordinarily perceived, yet his or her distance from this enabling framework is interpreted, in Arnold Toynbee's summation on monasticism, as a withdrawal "from the business and pleasure of the moment in order to measure human potential against the human condition". Outside directly religious contexts, Vincent van Gogh pursued his artistic vocation in poverty for a decade only for the profundity and skill of his work to later become emblematic of the spiritual and economic value of art as the aesthetic appreciation and monetary valuation of his work escalated astronomically.

The Christian Trappist monk Thomas Merton in *The Seven Storey Mountain* incidentally speaks for such unconventional life journeyers in describing their endeavours as capable of sowing seeds in the lives of people the hermit, mendicant or social rebel will never know, a prophecy fulfilled in the immense fruit borne in the lives of countless others by the hidden efforts of these people, nurturing in secret or in rebellion something precious they later share with the world, after incubating and giving birth to it in solitude and deprivation.

Theodore Monod in an essay which may be translated as "In the Land of Kaydara : An Exploration of a Symbolic Sudanese Tale", characterizes, most arrestingly, Kaidara's projection of this ecumenism of the concealed, the potency of the ostensibly improbable, as presented in these lines I hereby render with the aid of Google translation software:



A bent old man, clothed in lice covered rags, demands to meet and eat with Hammadi years after Hammadi has returned home from his seemingly unsuccessful quest for Kaidara, but greatly enriched in gold and eventually becoming king. The guard at the palace gates threatens to flog and throw out the audacious derelict, only for Hammadi to appear and request the man be treated respectfully and given audience.

There can be no monopoly of the truth. It is nowhere a whole. But everywhere she raises faithful witnesses, although most often ignored, sometimes much despised, they are often neither known by the crowd nor identified with the powers of the time, are not spoken of in the newspapers, but, nevertheless, their consecrated spirits evoke the ignored and stubborn Spirit inherent in the human race.

Beyond the explicitly religious contexts represented by many hermits and mendicants, various forms of these enabling inadequacies and deprivations emerge in terms of people who are able to use their time in prison, particularly in solitary confinement, as an opportunity for a depth of reflection that might not have been readily available otherwise.

These range from such examples as Viktor Frankl's discovery, in his imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps, of the impulse towards the creation or discovery of meaning as the central human drive, as he describes in *Man's Search for Meaning*, Wole Soyinka's meditations, in solitary confinement, on relationships between time and infinity, being and the source of being, as depicted in *The Man Died*, reflections on conjunctions between the stars and the immensity of time, "the eternal and infinite : of the order of the Universe-and of its Supreme Spirit; of the stars; of their internal state; and what time and the passing of time really are" narrated in *The Gulag Archipelago*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's account of imprisonment in Soviet labour camps, Dennis Brutus' soaring celebration of the beauty of the celestial luminaries in the context of the coldness of metal shackles as he stands on wet, sticky cement in prison for resisting apartheid in South Africa, among many more related to an understanding of the value of confinement and solitude, even when experienced in the context of punishment, for facilitating penetrating insight into the human condition, a situation to which Anthony Storr devotes a book to in [*Solitude : A Return to the Self*](#).

Kaidara integrates this range of possibilities evoked by the mendicant, the hermit, and the social nonconformist. He combines with these the figure of another perennial, universal cultural motif, that of the wandering , mysterious person of spiritual power, resonant examples of which include Gandalf, the itinerant wizard of



After they eat together, Hammadi having cleaned the lice off the old man's clothes, his visitor proves able to expound to Hammadi the hidden meaning of the various experiences he had on his years long quest for Kaidara, thus enabling Hammadi to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of that pivotal experience, synthesizing his past and present in relation to the significance of human existence, insights he had sought for years without success.

J.R.R.Tolkien's novel *The Lord of the Rings*, seemingly marked by old age yet embodying fathomless power, a prime agent in shaping the fortunes of the world, Odin the Norse High God as a one eyed wanderer, the other eye having been sacrificed in being dropped into the Well of Mimir at the roots of Yggdrasil, the tree that is the cosmos, in order to gain supernal knowledge, the Hindu deity Shiva, one of whose personifications is that of a naked, wandering mendicant, complementing the perception of him as the transcendental source of existence, a latter role he discharges partly through his solitary meditations on mount Kailash in the Himalayan range, the world's highest mountains.

This nexus of vulnerability, of human inadequacy and divine potency resonates also in the image of Jesus, the carpenter's son in the *Bible*, who, in the face of scepticism arising from his being without any advanced religious education, is yet able to inspire appreciation of his revolutionary reinterpretation of the Jewish scriptures, giving birth to a distinctive understanding of relationships between human and divine possibility, inspiring his followers to describe him as the embodiment of God incarnated to endure human frailty, suffering and death along with the divine overturning of natural law through his resurrection, as the means of building a bridge between the creator of the universe and humanity.

Unifying this global web of cultural and historical possibility is the figure of Kaidara, always mobile, near yet distant, present in forms unanticipated, elusive but accessible when he chooses, among the various understandings that may be gleaned from descriptions of him and from the poetic story, *Kaidara : A Fulani Cosmological Epic from Mali* by Ahmadou Hampate Ba, adapted by Ba into French from its original rendition and translated into English with notes and interview with Ba by Daniel Whitman and introduction and notes by Lilyan Kesteloot and freely available online at [webPulaaku](http://webPulaaku.com).

The Hermeneutics of the Initiatory Tale

The symbolism of Kaidara and his story demonstrate great potential for developing knowledge beyond the immediate cognitive space the tale generates. How can this further development be arrived at? Through the study of its literary structures and symbolism? Can the mystical and esoteric epistemology the narrative is described as created to serve be cultivated in another context, outside the social



On realizing this old man of uncommon wisdom must be Kaidara himself, Hammadi tries to embrace him in shocked joy, only for the man to sharply retreat from such contact, assuming a commanding stance in which his staff becomes a rod of light as he declaims the various forms, human, animal, elemental and fantastical, he had assumed in order to interact with and test Hammadi on his years ago quest for Kaidara, metamorphosing into a gloriously luminous form, blasting off into space, leaving Hammadi prostrate in stunned wonder.

immediacy of its cultural origins? Can it be adapted as a means of developing the human being to orient their lives in terms of the quest for the furthest possibilities of knowledge the figure of Kaidara embodies? Can the story facilitate exposure to transformations of consciousness, the integration of strategic encounters in the journey of life into a whole that enables a grasp of that terrestrial itinerary in the light of an engagement with the ultimacy of understanding that Kaidara embodies, actualizing in a person's life the summative encounter with Kaidara represented by Hammadi's final meeting with him in which the bent and dirty old man to whom he gives hospitality expounds to Hammadi the long sought for but till then unrealized significance of the central sequence of his life's journey, only for this personage to transform into a supra-human character radiant with unreachable light, blasting off into space as he tries to embrace him in gratitude for the rare insight provided?

I think this can be done, through the process summed up by Isidore Okpewho in "African Poetry : The Modern Writer and the Oral Tradition" involving the transformation of the "oral tradition into symbols so as to demonstrate its mythic essence". This symbolic transmutation, generated through the " creative, configurative power of the human mind expressed in varying degrees of intensity", as Okpewho describes the nature of myth in "Rethinking Myth", is already pursued to a degree in the tale and in Ba's interpretation of the narrative, but is capable of further development in order to build the Kaidara story into a philosophical and contemplative and even ritual vehicle, a structure of ideas and images which can be employed as a guide to wisdom in any context.

Kaidara studies, inspired by Ba's own descriptions of the hermeneutic vision, the philosophy of interpretation in terms of which the initiatory tale operates, has gone a long way in developing interpretations of the symbolic significance of the story. Ba's words on this, compiled from my Google software enabled translations of sections of the introduction and notes to Ba's *Njedo Dewal: Matrix of Calamity*, are particularly resonant, their luminous wealth a feast capable of evoking unceasing efforts to come to grips with the sublime possibilities of this initiatory narrative tradition:

Initiation can be understood in two ways, which, in fact, complement each other: there is the initiation received from outside and that which is accomplished by



Kaidara/Souppart mandala, a collage made up of selections from Etienne Souppart's illustrations for [The Secrets of Kaidara : An Animist Tale from Africa \(Tales of Heaven and Earth\)](#), by Hyacinthe Vulliez and Gwen Marsh, of Hammadi's encounters with Kaidara in the various forms the mysterious personage assumes to test and ultimately enlighten him, constellated round a circle the design of which suggests a multiplicity of paths of action and interpretation emerging from and converging in an inspirational matrix. The design connotes an expansion and integration of possibilities motivated by the understanding of existence as a constant encounter with the tests and opportunities for enlightenment Kaidara embodies, the daily experience of living unfolding into the course of a lifetime representing the divine entity's manifestations, the implications of which break open in ways that may be immediate, delayed or cumulative and which may or may not involve encounters with the fantastic.

oneself. The external initiation is the " opening of the eye", that is to say all the teaching that is given during traditional ceremonies, or retirement periods that follow. This teaching will live within the person who assimilates it, making it grow by adding to it his personal observations, understanding and experience. In fact, initiation continues throughout life. The initiatory story, the *jantol*, must be soaked into the self, and, if possible, relived in the self. It is recommended to return constantly to the story at significant events in one's life. As one's internal development changes, understanding will change, and one will discover new meanings in the story. Often, an event in one's life could illuminate the meaning of a particular episode in the tale. Conversely, it may help one to understand the meaning of what one is going through.

Myths, stories, legends or children's games have often been to the sages of ancient times a way to pass down through the centuries in a manner more or less veiled by the language of images, knowledge that is received in childhood, remaining etched deep in the memory of the individual to reappear perhaps at an appropriate time, with a new meaning. "If you want to save knowledge by enabling it to travel through time", said the old Bambara, "take it to the children". A Fulani adage says "Initiation begins at the sacred gates and ends at the grave.

The cycle composed by [the "Fulani Creation Story"] , *Njedo Dewal*, *Koumen*, *Kaidara* and the *Radiance of the Great Star* are Sudanese tales in which some will see only the surface of the text, enjoying the picturesque narrative, delighting in its literary power, while many, pushing further, will discover something of the meaning of that ancient wisdom hidden under the bark of words.

Encountering first - the story itself - the splendor of the garment, the bright colors of the fruit, the wealth of the box, that is the first step. Going beyond these without losing the sights that make up the scenery, one may try to reach the realities of which these ornaments could be seen as signs and symbols, the warm living body under weighted folds of



Kaidara/Souppart mandala against the background of an image of the Andromeda galaxy provided by Apple, the awesome sizes and immense distances captured in the celestial image suggesting the distance between existence and human knowledge, the creative capacity of the mind in mapping those spatialities and temporalities that dwarf that of the human being, even as the glowing heart of the galactic centre may inspire speculation about the capacity of consciousness to pierce the originating and sustaining heart of cosmos.

brocade, the almond nourishing and wholesome in its hull, the jewel in its box.

Moving beyond the limitations of the surface, a sensitive membrane shimmering in the sun, calling attention to its splendours both obvious and hidden, inviting a conjunction

of façade and consciousness, exploding into meaning like a sunburst, we will look together on the unfathomable abyss of Being, having won our way to the supreme good, the proposed object of adventure of our inner journey, the 'pearl of great price' of knowledge and spiritual certainty.

Getting inside a story is like stepping inside oneself. A story is a mirror in which everyone can find his own image".

Visual and Verbal Expansions of the Kaidara Mythos and its Cognitive Universe

The Visual

My efforts so far in this hermeneutic process consist in four initiatives, verbal and visual. The visual is represented by three collages. One collage is made up of Etienne Souppart's drawings of Hammadi's various encounters with Kaidara, depicted as a circle of possibilities suggesting the unification of a human life within a hermeneutic sequence constituted by encounters with the unanticipated possibilities for understanding of the integration of the singular and the multiple, particular incidents in life and the total circuit of living, dramatized in terms of the perception of life's journey as a stream of encounters with the mobile presence of Kaidara.

The second is created by juxtaposing the collage of encounters between Hammadi and Kaidara with a picture of the Andromeda galaxy, inspired by the description of Kaidara as more remote than the most distant star and yet integrating all possibility as a matrix within which he moves at will, appearing in any forms he chooses, at any point in time and space, a marvelous image of expansion and contraction, within a space both existential and cognitive.

The third consists in a collage made by placing a Batabwa sculpture of a venerable male figure from William Fagg and Margaret Plass'



Painting:
Victor Ekpuk

Sculpture:
Batabwa figure
from African
Sculpture by
William Fagg and
Margaret Plass

Collage:
Oluwatoyin Vincent
Adepoju

Ekpuk/Batabwa/Kaidara mandala

African Sculpture, described in detail at my speculative story on another African cognitive system, "[Setilu's Invention: The Origin of Ifa](#)", in the foreground of Victor Ekpuk's drawing *Composition #8*, in order to suggest the convergence of mystery and knowledge that characterizes Kaidara.

This conjunction is connoted in the collage, through Victor Ekpuk's signature evocation, of the intersection of the esoteric and the exoteric in his juxtaposing of enigmatic scripts with the conventional geometric form represented by concentric circles.

The centrifugal and centripetal pull of the structure is evocative, in the spirit of Hindu yantras and Buddhist mandalas, of the symbolism of cognitive convergence represented by movement towards a centre and cognitive expansion generated by movement away from a centre.

These contrastive but complementary structurations may be seen as strategies of interpretation of phenomena in terms of their character within a web of relations. These interpretive possibilities are exemplified by yantra and mandala cosmography, which employ these visual patterns in depicting, through centrifugal motion, the essence of being in its integration of the particulars of existence, the convergence of existence in relation its essence, and, through centripetal motion, the expansion of that essence into the variety in unity represented by the particulars of existence.

In Ekpuk's drawing, however, inspired, as the core of his aesthetic is, by the tension between explicit and concealed meaning in the Nsibidi hermeneutics of Nigeria's Ekpe esoteric order, this linear hermeneutic is complexified by the pervasive presence of scriptic forms unrelated to any known symbol system, demonstrating few or no clues as to their meaning, tantalizingly suggesting a structure of understanding but yielding none, resonating therefore, with the distance between apparent reality and actual reality, between the figure of the decrepit old man and the unfathomable reality he incarnates at the intersection of the human drive for understanding and its encompassing by limits the full scope of which are unknown, exemplified by Kaidara who is symbolized in the collage by the venerable figure holding a walking stick, the walking stick being emblematic of Kaidara's manifestation as a destitute old man.



The beauty of nature experienced in the life of the Fulani herdsman. in companionship with his cattle who are considered members of his family.

Art by Etienne Souppart in [*The Secrets of Kaidara : An Animist Tale from Africa \(Tales of Heaven and Earth\)*](#), by Hyacinthe Vulliez and Gwen Marsh.

The Verbal

The verbal is represented by my expanding Ba's verbal summations of Kaidara in relation to Kaidara's activities and manifestations in the story. I expand the verbal summations of the image of Kaidara in "[Quest for Ultimate Being : Invocation of Kaidara, Fulani God of Gold and of Knowledge](#)" by developing Ba's general description of Kaidara as well as the character's actions in the story into a poem which builds a picture of the divine agent by listing his qualities in a lyrical style directed at facilitating imaginative projection into the interpretive world the figure of Kaidara embodies and possibly even inspiring its use as a prayer.

I adopt these methods in the understanding that one inspiration in the development of religion is the creation of forms that can act as platforms for uplifting the mind, creating stairs of elevation the self climbs in focusing its aspiration to ultimate values. These values are more readily apprehended by being expressed in terms both concrete and incandescent, relatable to the particulars of life as sensorially observed but irreducible to those sensate particulars, a constellation of possibilities in which the non-concrete can provide inspiration and assist in the organization of life's experiences within a context of ultimate value.

The verbal is also demonstrated by my correlation of the symbolism of a Fulani creation story involving Gueno, the supreme being whom Kaidara is described as representing, with examples of African, Western and Asian thought and literature in "[Fulani Mythology and the Unity of Classical African Systems of Thought](#)".

The present essay correlates these verbal and visual contributions through a visual sequence complemented by verbal explications of symbolism. I am also considering using the figure of Kaidara, in its integration of ideas about ultimate possibilities of knowledge spanning social, material and metaphysical zones, in a context recognizing tensions between material wealth and knowledge of ultimate realities in relation to the challenges of inter-human encounters, as a means of correlating various approaches to the quest for knowledge and wisdom in terms of a single memorable figure.



Kaidara in his favourite appearance as an old man.

Art by Etienne Souppart in [*The Secrets of Kaidara: An Animist Tale from Africa \(Tales of Heaven and Earth\)*](#), by Hyacinthe Vulliez and Gwen Marsh.

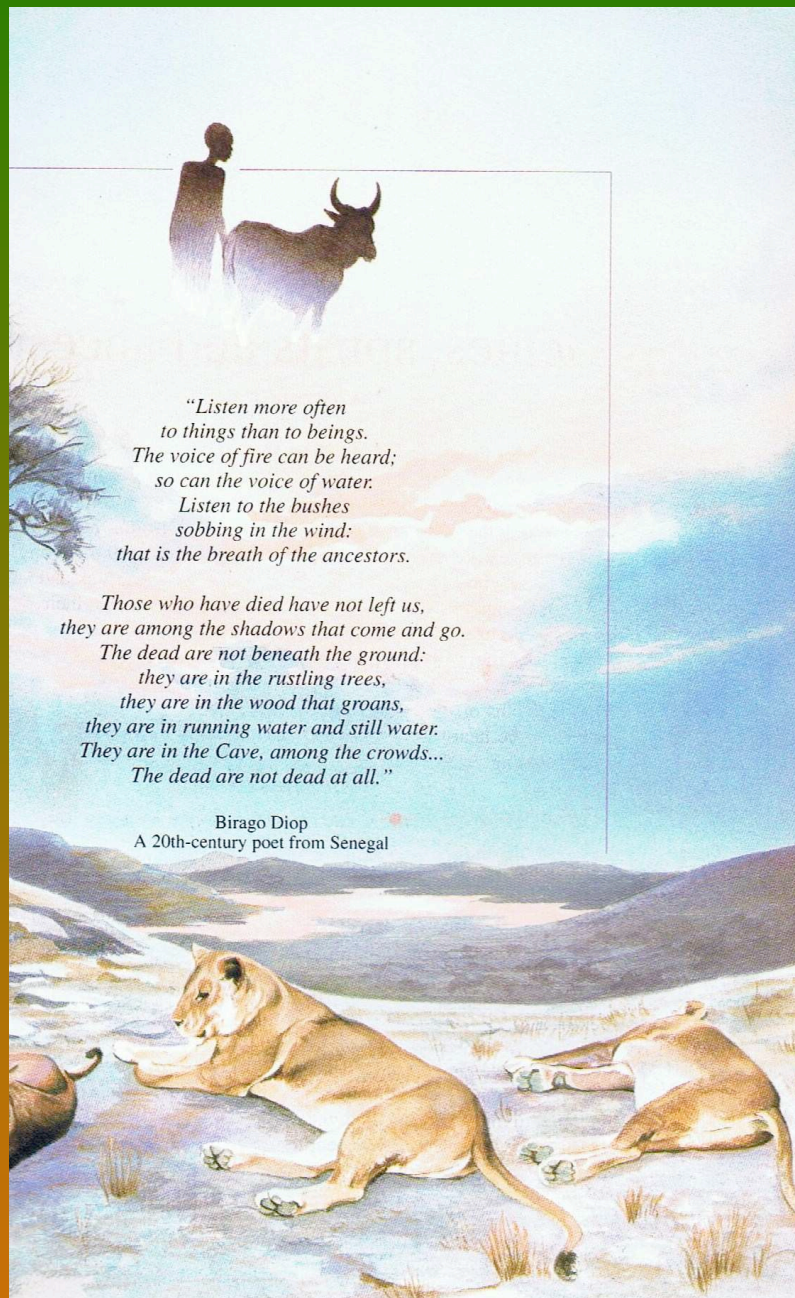
Internalising Kaidara

The figure of Kaidara represents a drive that is innermost for me, my yearning towards an ultimacy that transcends and yet subsumes existence, a concentration of meaning that is the ground of all. Kaidara focuses for me the immediacy of this hunger, constituting my innermost self and yet resonating in a depth far from the constellations that shape my biological composition and the situational moment. Kaidara's mobility and his multifarious manifestations emblemise the restlessness animating my engagement with the various structures of possibility, the shrines of knowledge, configuring humanity's encounter with existence.

The tension between gold and knowledge within a framework the face of which is the destitute in lice covered clothes projects the nakedness of all connection with the material demands of existence inspired by this flaming towards the ultimate, even as the necessities of embodiment and the configurations of society dictate exigencies which are practically inescapable.

This hunger strips me naked, at its most intense leading me to caring nothing for the demands of material human existence or the frameworks erected by society, neither for such mundanities as money or such possibilities as human companionship.

Unavoidably, however, the needs of the self, which cannot be satisfied by the potent force of knowledge, its blissful embrace searingly inflaming but ultimately incapable of replacing human warmth, and the relentless control of access to goods and services by the ubiquitous power of commerce, brings one inescapably back to the fact of being an embodied creature in an embodied world, thereby needing to relate to the vision that is Kaidara, in terms of metaphysical understanding, knowledge of one's place in relation to the cosmic journey, but also awareness of social relations and one's own psychology, and the gaining of economic power vital for access to resources in the material world, in other words, embodying, as far as one can, the totality that is Kaidara, a beam of light from the burning hearth that is Gueno, god of gold and knowledge, embodiment of the structure of the world and of time, epitomizing knowledge of cosmic order and disorder, knowledge of the laws of society and of psychology, the far and the very near, remote yet very close, intimate to the self in the ground of being that anchors



*"Listen more often
to things than to beings.
The voice of fire can be heard;
so can the voice of water.
Listen to the bushes
sobbing in the wind:
that is the breath of the ancestors.*

*Those who have died have not left us,
they are among the shadows that come and go.
The dead are not beneath the ground:
they are in the rustling trees,
they are in the wood that groans,
they are in running water and still water.
They are in the Cave, among the crowds...
The dead are not dead at all."*

Birago Diop
A 20th-century poet from Senegal

The life of the Fulani herdsman, in companionship with his beloved cattle, as a life of attunement with nature, a medium of Spirit communicating the presence of the ancestors.

Art by Etienne Souppart in [*The Secrets of Kaidara : An Animist Tale from Africa \(Tales of Heaven and Earth\)*](#), by Hyacinthe Vulliez and Gwen Marsh.

existence, yet boundless, inexhaustible, indicating the ever receding vastness of knowledge but also its possibility of configuration into provisional patterns of wholeness.